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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationships between reported sexual behaviors of college students and their perceptions of the sexual behaviors of their peers. The subjects were students enrolled in a basic human sexuality course offered at a large midwestern university. Fifty-seven women and seventeen men were given questionnaires devised to discover how they perceived the sexual behaviors of their peers. They also were asked to report their own actual sexual behavior. Both men and women perceived their peers as being more active sexually than was the actual case. (JD)

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A COMPARISON OF PERCEIVED AND ACTUAL SEXUAL BEHAVIORS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past number of years, colleges and universities have shown an increased interest in the area of human sexuality. Most general health education courses have a human sexuality component, new human sexuality "basic" courses have been developed and the number of "specialized" courses in this area have increased. Along with this trend, a change in the teaching of these courses has been observed. Whereas, at one time, the instructors' emphasis was on the cognitive level, today's approach seems to have shifted toward affective instruction. Attitudes and values, two words omnipresent in the health educator's "repertoire," have taken on great significance in the teaching of human sexuality. Course content, if properly developed takes into account the attitudes, values and behavior of students. The authors, concerned about content and process in the teaching of human sexuality, sought to determine the sexual behavior patterns of students in a large midwestern university. In addition, information concerning students' perceptions of the sexual behavior of their peer group was investigated. Since attitudes and values may often be determined by perceptions, the researchers were concerned about the accuracy with which these perceptions were made. [1,2]

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationships between reported sexual behaviors of college students and their

perceptions of the sexual behaviors of their peers.

LIMITATIONS

The subjects in this study were college students enrolled in the basic human sexuality course offered at a large midwestern university.

SIGNIFICANCE

Since sexuality is a universal phenomenon, we would expect a great deal to be known about it. Herant Katchadourian and Donald Lunde[3] state that the variability of sexual behavior as well as the regulations societies place on sexual activity have prompted many questions. One of the most frequently asked is: "Can we generalize from personal experience?" Numerous studies which attempt to provide answers to this question have been conducted. Although the researchers did collect data which identified behaviors of students, our emphasis was the perceptions these students have of their peers. Our concern of one's perceptions is closely related to attitudinal development--that is, a greater understanding of attitudes and how they are developed is basic to health education outcomes.[4] Staples[5] also feels a need exists for a greater comprehension of the dynamic factors that underlie the varing forms of sexual attitudes and behavior. As early as 1958, Mayshark[6] indicated that an understanding of attitudinal development is necessary toward evaluating the outcomes of health education.

The aforementioned individuals share one commonality--that of the significance of attitudes to behavior. The researchers examined one variable which assumes great importance toward attitudinal development -- perception. The researchers have assumed that one's perceptions of the sexual behavior of the peer group will be a determining factor in the formation of attitudes. For example, if college males perceive females to be "very loose," perhaps these males would expect sexual favors on a first date.

Since the subjects in this study were enrolled in a human sexuality course, half of which is small group discussion, a large period of time was allotted toward attitudinal development. Results of this study were shared with the respondents with the idea of developing an understanding of how their attitudes were formulated. The following questions were answered:

1. Did males accurately perceive the sexual behaviors of other males and females?

2. Did females accurately perceive the sexual behaviors of other males and females?

Answers to the above provided insight to one's attitudes and behavior, thereby opening the door to a more open and honest understanding of the peer group. Specific findings are discussed later in this paper.

METHODOLOGY

The seventy-four (74) subjects in this study were enrolled in the basic human sexuality course offered in the Health Education department.

There were fifty seven (57) females and seventeen (17) males in the sample. Since this study did not have a large N, a Yates Correction was used for the adjustment.

Each participant completed a two-page, eight question survey designed by the authors for data collection. This survey listed various sexual behaviors as well as personal data such as age, sex, major course of study, etc. A response matrix (frequency X behavior) was provided. A total of forty-three (43) variables were present in the questionnaire.

Course Organization and Data Collection

The basic human sexuality course provides students with one class meeting of the entire group (lecture) and another in a small group setting per week. A group leader/facilitator (a teaching assistant or faculty member) directs each small groups' activities. To minimize experimenter bias, the survey forms were distributed to each of the eight (8) small group leaders during the first day of the course. These leaders were directed to explain the voluntary nature of the survey, as well as disclose the nature of the questions contained in the survey. In turn, one survey was distributed to each willing participant by the group leaders. No students were unwilling to complete the questionnaire. Upon completion of the survey, each student was asked to place it in a large envelope provided by the researchers. The last individual to turn in their form was to seal the envelope. Thus confidentiality was preserved and anonymity was maintained.

Following data reduction, chi-square comparisons were used to determine the accuracy with which students perceived the sexual activities of their peers. Male and female predictions were used in these determinations. They were compared to the mean frequencies of reported sexual behaviors.

RESULTS

The composition of the subject sample was seventy-seven percent (77%) females and twenty-three percent (23%) males. The majority of subjects (89%) were between the ages of nineteen (19) and twenty-two (22). Ninety-one percent (91%) reported being white/caucasian while nine percent (9%) were black. Although the major areas of enrollment varied widely, thirty-six percent (36%) were in some type of health-related training program (Nursing, Health Education, Pharmacy). To avoid biasing the results, the questionnaires which were completed by married students (n=5) were not included in the data analyzed.

Mean frequencies of reported sexual activity, along with perceptions of the behaviors present regarding the peer group, appear in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

On the whole, when asked about how the peer group behaved sexually, both males and females were thought to be more sexually active than either

group reported. Differences were observed between males and females in their ability to perceive accurately each others behavior. These differences were illustrated by using chi-square comparisons. Table 2 shows that males were able to predict more accurately male sexual

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INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

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activities than females on this measure for eleven of the twelve behavior categories. The resulting chi-square value was significant beyond the 0.01 level.

When predicting female sexual activity, males were closer than females in seven behavior categories and they were equal in two catagories (Table 3). However, these differences were not significant ($P<0.5$).

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

An unexpected finding in this study was the reported solitary masturbation activity of both males and females. Eighteen percent (18%) of the males reported having never maturbated, while fifty-four percent (54%) of the females reported this same response. The findings generated by Kinsey, et al. vary considerably from those in this study. Kinsey and his colleagues reported that of the subjects they surveyed,

only 6% of the males and 40% of the females never masturbated. In this study, males perceived 12% of the females as having never masturbated while females perceived 18% of their group as having never masturbated. With respect to male masturbatory activity, men felt that 12% of their peers never masturbated, while women felt that only 3% of the males never masturbated. In all cases, however, perceived masturbatory activity was higher than the actual behavior. In other words, individuals thought that everyone else masturbated more than they.

Another significant finding was observed in the area of genital intercourse. Twenty-nine percent (29%) of the males and sixteen percent (16%) of the females reported having never engaged in sexual intercourse. Once again, each gender group perceived more sexual activity than was reported. In this case, males felt only 12% of other men never had genital intercourse; females narrowed the number of abstainers to 5%. As for the perceptions about female genital intercourse, males thought 6% of the females were abstainers from sexual intercourse; females thought the percentage to be higher. These findings may be indicative of the disparity between those sexual activities actually being engaged in by individuals and the societal expectations placed on particular age groups as participants in such activities.

Unsurprisingly, males reported being more sexually active than females. In sever of the twelve behavior categories, males mean frequency of activities were greater than females. Since society expects males to be more sexually active, this may account for the fact that males explored as many outlets as possible. This may indicate another example

of the "double standard" at play. Another factor that enters the mainstream is the possible effect of the feminist movement. As noted earlier, females engage in genital intercourse more often than males, and males masturbate more frequently than females. Perhaps "Women's Lib" has made females more selective in who they have intercourse with, while more males are being selectively excluded from engaging in intercourse. Thus, they turn more often to masturbation for sexual release. More research in these areas is needed to make definitive statements regarding the sexual trends in our society.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Males accurately perceived the behaviors of other males but not of females. Females were unable to perceive accurately male or female behaviors. Accordingly the attitude that "everyone else is more sexually active than I" prevailed. This finding may be a reflection of the media's effect upon one's perceptions of sexual behavior. If sexual behavior is depicted as widespread, then society will believe this to be fact. In turn, this may lead individuals to stereotype, thus forming attitudes and values which are incongruent to actual behavior. The content and process of teaching human sexuality can be better adapted toward meeting student needs if students and teachers are made aware of the disparities between perceptions and behaviors. Dr. William H. Genne[8] supports this belief when he says: "Confused meanings lead to confused behavior and of course it follows that confused behavior leads to confused relationships." Here lies the crux of this study as well as one of the

objectives of sex education--to clarify the meaning of sexual behavior and to develop a basis for sound interpersonal relationships.[9]

What do the results of this study mean to the participants? The findings will be used in small group discussions to discuss questions such as:

1. Why did the perceptions of sexual behavior differ from the actual sexual behaviors?

2. What influenced my perceptions?

3. What does my behavior mean?

One of the functions of sex education facilitators is to create an atmosphere of group sharing. The results of this study may provide data which may clarify what exists within the group setting by presenting honest beliefs. The garnering of new information--in this case, perceptions and their relationship to behavior, helps clarify one's attitudes and values. Thus, the teacher of human sexuality can serve better in his/her role as a positive change agent.

Table 1

Mean Monthly Frequencies of Reported Behaviors and Perceptions of Others' Behaviors by Sex

Behavior	Personal Activity		Perceived Female Behavior		Perceived Male Behavior	
	Male	Female	By Male	By Female	By Male	By Female
1. Solitary masturbation	4.7	1.6	5.0	2.2	6.5	5.6
2. Manual stimulation to orgasm by partner	5.2	4.3	4.7	4.7	4.7	6.5
3. Manual stimulation to orgasm of partner	4.8	3.2	4.5	5.4	4.7	6.7
4. Oral-genital stimulation by partner	4.6	3.2	3.2	3.8	3.8	6.5
5. Oral-genital stimulation of partner	3.6	3.7	3.0	5.0	3.6	6.9
6. Genital intercourse	4.3	5.6	3.7	7.8	6.2	9.7
7. Anal intercourse	0.2	0.2	0.6	1.3	0.7	2.1
8. Use of mechanical aids such as vibrator	1.1	0.04	2.4	2.0	0.7	1.8
9. Group Sex	0.1	0.02	0.3	1.2	0.5	1.8
10. Homosexual Activity	1.1	0.04	0.5	1.8	0.8	2.6
11. Master-slave role playing as part of sexual activity	0.01	0.2	1.4	1.0	1.3	2.1
12. Inflicting or receiving pain during sex	0.01	0.1	0.8	0.8	1.0	1.8

Table 2

Chi-Square Comparison of Best Predictor of Male Sexual Behavior by Sex using the Yates Correction7

Behavior		Value Closest to Reported Behavior	
		Male Perception	Female Perception
1.	Solitary masturbation		X
2.	Manual stimulation to orgasm by partner	X	
3.	Manual stimulation to orgasm of partner	X	
4.	Oral-genital stimulation by partner	X	
5.	Oral-genital stimulation of partner	X	
6.	Genital intercourse	X	
7.	Anal intercourse	X	
8.	Use of mechanical aids such as vibrator	X	
9.	Group Sex	X	
10.	Homosexual Activity	X	
11.	Master-slave role playing as part of sexual activity	X	
12.	Inflicting or receiving pain during sex	X	

Chi-square value = 6.75
$p < .01$

Table 3

Chi-Square Comparison of Best Predictor of Female Sexual Behavior by Sex using the Yates Correction[7]

Behavior		Value Closest to Reported Behavior	
		Male Perception	Female Perception
1.	Solitary masturbation		X
2.	Manual stimulation to orgasm by partner	—**	—**
3.	Manual stimulation to orgasm of partner	X	
4.	Oral-genital stimulation by partner	X	
5.	Oral-genital stimulation of partner	X	
6.	Genital intercourse	X	
7.	Anal intercourse	X	
8.	Use of machanical aids such as vibrator		X
9.	Group Sex	X	
10.	Homosexual Activity	X	
11.	Master-slave role playing as part of sexual activity		X
12.	Inflicting or receiving pain during sex	—**	—**

Chi-square value = 0.9
$p < .5$

**Values for these behaviors were equal for males and females thereby cancelling their effect on the equation.

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